Navigating Bias: A Critical Examination of Beverley Brenna's Select Works through Ableism

Submitted by

Banumathi J

19PHENF001

Supervisor

Dr. M. Anjum Khan

Department of English

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Introduction:

Literature exemplifies enduring significance as an abiding repository of written works. As an artistic medium, it serves as a reflective mirror to human existence, capturing both individual and collective experiences comprehensively. This encompassing nature spans a spectrum of cultural traditions, behavioural norms, perceptions, ideas, and intellectual contemplations. Within the scholarly domain, literature embraces a diverse array of literary canons, including distinguished traditions such as American Literature, Canadian Literature, and Indian Literature. It also extends its purview to specialized fields like Disability Studies, facilitating a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted dimensions inherent in human expression and experience.

Disability is a socially constructed concept, influenced by spatial, temporal, and inclusive factors. The perception of disability varies within contextual frameworks, where normalcy is defined by the able-bodied population, leading to the marginalization of those not meeting this standard. As Michael Oliver emphasizes in *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice and The Politics of Disablement*, historical oppression and repression have been faced by individuals with disabilities: "For centuries, people with disabilities have been an oppressed and repressed group…" (xv). Disability Studies focuses on proactive interventions and advocates for the rights of disabled individuals, considering cultural and political dimensions.

Beverley Brenna

Beverley Brenna, born on October 1, 1962, in Saskatoon, Canada, emerges as a versatile and influential Canadian literary figure. Recognized as a novelist, short story writer, poet, and playwright, she distinguishes herself further as a special educator holding a Ph.D. in Children's Literature.

Brenna is specifically selected for the present study among Canadian authors owing to her substantial contributions in delving into neurodevelopmental disorders, specifically Asperger's syndrome and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), as portrayed in her *The Wild Orchid* trilogy and the novel *The Moon Children*. Her literary journey originates from her formative years, where she commenced the craft of poetry at the age of seven, gradually expanding her creative repertoire to encompass short stories and novels. Influenced profoundly by her parents and educators, Brenna's early exposure to literature played a pivotal role in shaping her identity both as a reader and a writer.

Beverley Brenna's literary oeuvre maintains a deliberate focus on the experiences of young adults and children, intricately weaving a narrative fabric that spans across parents, teachers, peers, and other adult figures. Through the protagonist's lens, Brenna introduces a diverse cast, providing a nuanced exploration of their interactions within the confines of small-town Canada. The everyday backdrop is richly textured with familiar settings such as schools, homes, shops, coffeehouses, and the world of nature.

Thesis statement

In the contemporary world, stark divisions persist, with one particularly conspicuous fault line being ableism—a pervasive social construct wherein individuals deemed 'normal' often wield undue influence over those living with disabilities. This scholarly endeavour embarks on a rigorous evaluation of specific literary works authored by Beverley Brenna, with the overarching aim of shedding a penetrating light on the presence of ableism within these narratives and, in doing so, contributing to the ongoing discourse and rectification of this deeply ingrained societal prejudice

Objectives:

- Examine the portrayal of the 'normate' concept within Brenna's narratives, shedding light on its influence on individuals with disabilities and societal perceptions

- Investigate how Beverley Brenna's literary works depict characters with disabilities in the context of stigma, exploring their contribution to challenging or perpetuating stereotypes
- Explore the representation of inclusion in Brenna's works, highlighting instances of resistance against ableism and their impact on broader awareness and acceptance
- Analyse the overall influence of Brenna's writings on the discourse surrounding ableism, literature, and societal attitudes towards disability

Research Parameters and Methodology

Primary Texts

This research centers on the in-depth examination of key primary texts, such as *The Wild Orchid*, *Waiting for No One*, *The White Bicycle*, and chosen short stories from *Something to Hang on To*, specifically exploring their treatment of themes related to disability.

Methodology

The key scholarly texts, including *Keywords for Disability* by Adam, Rachael, et al., *The Disability Studies Reader* edited by Lennard J. Davis, and *Culture – Theory – Disability* edited by Anne Waldschmidt, Hanji Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen, constitute the essential underpinnings of this research. The documentation adheres to the guidelines of the *MLA,* 9th edition.

Structure:

This scholarly study comprises five chapters. The first chapter, "Introduction," provides an overview of disability studies, examines Canadian writers' portrayals of disability, and establishes Beverley Brenna's position within this literary landscape. Following the introduction, the second chapter, "Confronting Normal," delves into selected primary texts, exploring normate perspectives and their implications for understanding ability. The third chapter, "Shades of Stigma," focuses on the examination of stigma within

the chosen texts. The fourth chapter, titled “Addressing Ableism,” delves into spatial considerations and accessibility, laying the groundwork for an exploration of inclusion and its potential to address ableism. The fifth chapter “conclusion” consolidates the findings and observations, culminating in recommendations drawn from the study’s outcomes.

Chapter II, “Confronting the Normal,” critically examines ableism’s stereotypical lens on disability within selected literary texts. It underscores societal perspectives on ‘ability,’ ‘normalcy,’ and ‘crip,’ emphasizing the marginalized voices of those with diverse disabilities. Society categorizes individuals as ‘defective’ or ‘deviant’ when deviating from the normative body, offering insights into the socially constructed nature of all bodies. As the able body sets unrealistic standards, individuals endure pain to attain privileges associated with able-bodiedness, echoing the socially constructed myth of an idealized body. In the article “Models of disability: A brief overview,” Retief and Letsosa cite Carlson, characterizing disability as inherently negative, and perceived as “a personal tragedy.”

The evolving concept of “ability” takes a negative turn, reinforcing able-bodied privilege and perpetuating rigid standards. Fiona Kumari Campbell boldly asserts that “ability” stands in direct opposition to disability, shaping an individual's social structure and status within society. Perceptions of disability, linked to the notion of being normal, challenge fixed characteristics, categorizing individuals based on a normative scale. This portrayal of disability as hopeless and impaired, subjects individuals to constant scrutiny, questioning their very existence. The dichotomy between able-bodied and disabled bodies, likened to a coin, grants privilege and a sense of worth to the able-bodied, while those failing to meet such standards are invalidated and confined within a disability status.

The *Trilogy* novels, *The Moon Children*, and the short story collection, *Something to Hang on To*, provide profound insights into the lives of individuals challenging societal norms, disrupting the concept of the normate. These works explore the complexities of

navigating a world that often fails to acknowledge and accommodate unique identities and disabilities, highlighting the oppressive nature of societal expectations on those deemed "different." Drawing from the normate theory in disability studies, the narratives reveal power dynamics that marginalize disabled individuals in a society privileging able-bodied individuals. Despite these challenges, the characters assert their right to be seen, heard, and valued, embracing their disabilities as valid aspects of their identities. Through this journey of self-acceptance, they contribute to dismantling societal barriers and call for a critical revaluation of norms, urging the creation of a more inclusive and equitable world that celebrates the full spectrum of human experiences.

Chapter III, "Shades of Stigma," rigorously examines selected literary texts by Beverley Brenna, focusing on the complex concept of stigma. Resultantly, individuals portrayed endure a continuous cycle of trauma, feeling marginalized, insignificant, and rendered invisible. The overarching objective is to meticulously analyse the portrayal of characters with disabilities, illuminating the profound impact of stigma on their lives. In the words of Lennard Davis, disability serves as a stark symbol of inequality, justifying inferiority and historically assigning individuals with disabilities an inferior status (18).

Stigma, rooted in negative beliefs about differences, creates a division between disabled and able-bodied individuals, resulting in an imbalance of power and leaving the stigmatized powerless. The evolution of the concept of disability parallels other social constructs, yet it remains largely unacknowledged as a broader societal issue. Negative language, such as 'retard' and 'freak,' dehumanizes specific communities, perpetuating harmful actions, discrimination, and negative stereotypes about individuals with disabilities.

Characters like Taylor Jane, Billy, and others in the *Trilogy*, *The Moon Children*, and the short story collection, *Something to Hang on To*, exemplify the consistent underestimation

and marginalization of individuals with disabilities. These characters face mistreatment and societal neglect, leading to the development of low self-esteem.

Chapter IV, “Addressing Ableism,” delves into Beverley Brenna's writings, exploring avenues like accommodation and inclusive spaces for individuals with disabilities to counter ableist perspectives. This investigation emphasizes the vital role of accessibility and space concepts. Derived from Latin, ‘inclusion’ denotes equitable access, echoing Cigman’s assertion that all children should be treated with respect. However, the prioritization of inclusion faces challenges due to limited resources, hindering efforts to dismantle ableist ideals as individuals with disabilities integrate into society.

The core relationship between space and accessibility emerges as pivotal for fostering genuine inclusion within societal structures. Both physical and conceptual spaces play a crucial role in enabling access, participation, and integration for individuals with diverse abilities. Purposefully designed environments, accommodating various needs, not only communicate a message of acceptance and value but also break down barriers to full participation. Addressing ableism through inclusion necessitates a holistic societal reconfiguration, challenging biased practices ingrained in ableist frameworks. Inclusion, as more than just physically accessible spaces, cultivates a culture of genuine acceptance, recognizing diverse abilities in decision-making, education, employment, and social engagements. This proactive approach transforms societal norms, fostering empathy, understanding, and a collective commitment to equity, ultimately contributing to the creation of a truly inclusive community. The departure from inclusive efforts to emphasize the fundamental “right to be in the world” underlines the intricate challenges in creating access, particularly in the face of societal frameworks that disproportionately favor able-bodied individuals, leaving those with disabilities to grapple with pervasive ableist influences.

The texts illustrate the profound impact of providing space, accommodation, and accessibility for characters grappling with disabilities. It becomes evident that when these individuals have the necessary accessibility, it naturally fosters a sense of inclusion. This, in turn, has the potential to challenge and address ableism within society.

Chapter V, "Conclusion," converges on hidden disabilities, societal stigma, trauma, and the pervasive negative perception of those with disabilities, deeply impacting individuals living with these conditions. Extensive research reveals an intricate network of challenges, emphasizing the urgent need for societal shifts and enhanced empathy toward disabled individuals. The core chapters on normativity, stigma, and addressing ableism serve as pivotal pillars, justifying the thesis statement about the persistence of ableism in the contemporary world. In-depth analysis yields significant findings, shedding light on the intricate interplay of factors and uncovering previously unexplored aspects within the study's scope. These findings contribute valuably to a broader discourse surrounding the subject matter.

The research highlights a critical issue: people facing invisible disabilities often confront stigma and discrimination, resulting in deep emotional or psychological wounds. The experience of being invalidated, marginalized, and disconnected from society creates profound trauma, exacerbating mental health challenges. Additionally, the study underscores the profound struggle parents face in accepting their children's impairments, affecting both the children and their own selves emotionally. In conclusion, the UN sustainability model proves relevant when applied to the discourse surrounding disability, emphasizing the link between sustainable development and the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Acknowledging disability as both a cause and consequence of poverty, inequality, and exclusion, the UN model advocates for inclusive societies through comprehensive and interconnected goals, providing a roadmap for addressing various dimensions of disability. Disabilities depicted in literature challenge stereotypes, and Beverley Brenna's portrayal

beckons for empathy and inclusion, emphasizing the urgent need for a compassionate, fair, and inclusive society through literature, media, and research.

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Waldschmidt, Anne, Hanji Berressem & Moritz Ingwersen (Eds.,). *Culture – Theory – Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies.* Bielefeld, 2017.

Publications

S. No	Article	Journal	Other Details Vol/No/Page No/ Year	Published in UGC-CARE/ Scopus Indexed/ Web of Sience
1	Breaking of the Dawn in Beverley Brenna's *Waiting for No One*	Studies in Indian Places Names (ISSN: 2394 – 3114	Vol. 40, No. 43 Pg. no: 15-18 Feb. 2020	UGC CARE
2	The Ableism Paradox: Deciphering Disability through a Scholarly Lens	Journal of Literature and Aesthetics	Acceptance received on 4th Oct. 2023	UGC CARE